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Author(s)	Lim, Catherine
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The Ideal and the Pragmatics – Bridging the Gap in General Paper Teaching*

CATHERINE LIM

The topic of my talk sounds a little depressing but I notice gaps exist everywhere, even in our private lives. It will be very useful for you once you go into the junior colleges (JCs) to be aware of the gaps and see how you narrow them.

The JC situation is a very unique one. Students are put into a situation that is quite alarming to them and it will be very useful for us teachers to understand that right from the start. Now, let's consider that from the psychological point of view. Here is a 16-year-old student thrown into a situation where expectations are very different. The JC or Pre-University (Pre-U) is seen as a kind of threshold. Secondary Four marks the end of the days of childish behaviour and JC marks the entry into adult behaviour. Even though the expectations may not be spelt out, they are nonetheless tacit and certainly very strong in the whole atmosphere of the JCs. In fact, they have strong national backing. Notice the kind of attention that is given to JCs. Look at the Pre-U seminars that are organised for the students every year that get more and more sophisticated. This year, very distinguished people were flown over to talk to them on a whole variety of topics. Even on a light note, the JCs also take centre stage because of the government's desire for young people to mix and to get romantically interested in one another. In a whole variety of ways, the students are suddenly thrown into a situation where they are expected to be mature adults.

Perhaps, more important for us as teachers, is the curriculum. I can only speak with some authority on two subjects, that is, General Paper and Literature because I taught these. It seems to me there is such a quantum jump between the curriculum in Secondary Four and that of the JCs. The higher cognitive skills are all expected at JC.

* (From her speech at the Seminar on "Teaching in the Junior Colleges and Teaching of General Paper" held on 23rd November 1987 at the Institute of Education)

They include the skills of synthesis and analysis, evaluation and also creativity. This sort of thing is beginning to be emphasised in the schools and it is expected that the students at JCs will already have acquired these skills. The expectations translate, of course, into a different kind of pedagogy at the JCs, that is, into the lecture method, the tutorial method, project work and generally independent work. Students are in fact expected to take the initiative in many things, for instance, to do research on their own.

Even in terms of physical facilities, you see the JCs as different. They have beautiful lecture theatres which are air-conditioned that are definitely superior to the kind of facilities you see in Secondary Four. So in every way, visible or invisible, the JC setting is different. The ideal JC student, to match this setting, would be the mature, confident, independent young man or woman. What about the reality? I get the impression that a large number of students who enter JCs are still shy, timid, some of them socially awkward, some still very much dependent on the old methods that they had been used to in lower secondary and even in the primary schools, for example, spoon-feeding, guidance from the teacher at every step, the need for things to be spelt out for them in very specific terms. Of course, there are students who show initiative and independence, but they are not the majority.

I wish to talk about General Paper (GP) because I will be able to give you more concrete details about the gap between the ideal and the pragmatics as we see in the JCs. There is no syllabus for GP; there are only guidelines which are presented in a very general way. Students are supposed to be able to write with 'maturity'. The word 'maturity' is definitely emphasised and they are expected to write well on a whole range of topics that are very intimidating not only to students but also to teachers. You will find topics that include social issues, woman's liberation, politics, the role of US, the role of Russia and so on. Then you have the whole range of scientific topics such as the principles of refrigeration, the use of colour, the philosophy of science, the spirit of scientific enquiry. There are also topics that have to do with art and culture. If you compare the content of GP and Secondary Four English, it will show the kind of amazing leap that I mentioned earlier. In Secondary Four, the majority of topics that the pupils are expected to write about never go beyond the simple

argumentative or factual. Pupils are expected to write a little story about a stranger, about their experiences in childhood, a bad dream, or to describe their neighbours, or to give simple facts about environmental pollution. Suddenly at the Pre-U level, they are taken on a much higher level of abstraction and conceptualisation. Thus they are expected to have wide knowledge which means extensive reading which in fact our students seldom have the time to do. If you have to deal with a wide range of topics like that, it also means a whole range of reading and writing skills that must be quite alien to the new student just coming into Pre-U One. For instance, it means not only knowledge but also selection. He must be able to select from his store of knowledge, to organise his selection, to present it, in accordance with the specific demands of the essay topic or question. He also must be able to express his ideas coherently, clearly and convincingly. The language and the kind of expression for story telling and for writing about your parents or your pets are so much less demanding than those needed to argue for the value of the scientific method, for the spirit of scientific enquiry, for the need for art in the school curriculum and so on. It translates therefore into a whole series of difficulties for the students. So this is the gap that I see in the teaching of the General Paper.

There are other problems including the constraints of time and resources. And there is the problem of the General Paper teacher. There are some teachers who are not particularly enamoured of GP teaching but who have been conscripted to do that. That would be an additional difficulty not only for the teacher but also for the students obviously. I could just give you a few examples of some of the rather unprofitable responses to this problem. There have been many good programmes in schools but it might be useful to mention to you a few of those which I see as totally profitless. One of them is this. The teacher is probably a little alarmed by the demands made on his knowledge, on his skills in teaching and so on. He somehow has the impression that all GP topics must be at a certain very high level, must have an air of academic respectability and erudition. So I see topics just thrown at students, even students newly entering Pre-U One, which sound very impressive such as 'Man is technologically a giant and morally a pygmy', 'World unity is a Sisyphean task.' Do you expect all students to know the myth of Sisyphus? I suspect the teacher just plucked these topics out from

somewhere because they were attractive, because they were glamorous and maybe they gave the whole aura of mystery and grandeur surrounding this whole initiation rite of the Pre-U. Fortunately, there are not many instances of that and I have to confess to a penchant for dramatic examples.

Another rather unprofitable activity which I have seen in schools, unprofitable because it seems to me the students do not really gain anything from it, is to get students to do research. That by itself is fine but sometimes the students are not given any guidelines. It is simply this: "Could you please do research on fossil fuels?" I see students spending weeks getting reams of very detailed and technical information on fossil fuels, on democracy, Marxism, and so on, which have little practical value.

However, I must not omit to give examples of very good programmes in GP teaching. They are the means by which you bridge the gap. The first thing is to be aware of constraints namely, constraints of time, of resources, of teachers and their ability and experience, and of student ability. The best way to bridge the gap between the ideal and the realities in GP teaching is for teachers to get together and say "OK, what do we do now? We have these constraints our students are not particularly good, they do not read widely and yet at the end of the two year course this is what we have to achieve. What do we do?" I think that is about the best start: to be aware of the constraints and to work out a kind of realistic programme. Now, one of the things to be aware of is examinations. Though we do not get very comfortable in talking about them, they are a very, very real thing and students never stop worrying about obtaining the requisite grade for getting into the university. You cannot blame them and I think teachers ought to be aware of that. But, at the same time, I do not think the 2 years need be spent in preparing them for the GP exam. It would be useful to make use of the first year when they are not that exam-conscious to inculcate the skills and then in Pre-U Two, or the latter half of Pre-U Two, you can leave them with their obsession with the examinations. Under the circumstances, what would be a useful programme? It seems to me one of the most useful things is actually to work out not only content areas – the social topics, politics, history, geography, the science topics – but also the skills necessary for the writing of a GP essay or the answering of questions in the GP comprehension exercise.

There is a great deal of literature now on higher reading skills and you could help students in that. Again, there are the very specific skills required in writing an essay, for instance, the ability to introduce a topic, to write coherently, to put across a point persuasively without being overemotional, to conclude an essay, to link up arguments, to dispute, to argue, to persuade. For this, teachers will have to put in a great deal of effort because they may have to write their own materials and grade them to suit the needs of their students. It might also be useful for you to help your student in stages, in small but very definite steps by devising exercises that emphasise a certain skill at a time. You might want to concentrate on the skill of introduction: How do you introduce a topic that will dispose a person to want to read the rest of your essay? Then you develop a number of simple exercises to help the student in this particular skill. When the student is a little bit more confident, you take him on to the next stage, or on to a higher level. I have seen this programme in schools. It works because it gives students the ability to go from one level to another. This is a good example of the bridging of the gap I mentioned just now. At Secondary Four, they are used to comprehension passages that are mainly narrative or descriptive or factual, for example, a description about some ancient civilization or some travelling experience but at Pre-U level, the passages are purely of the expository kind and are, therefore, much more demanding.

In the final analysis, I suppose for any GP programme to be useful, there is no escaping this: to be aware of the gap that exists between the ideal and the reality, and then to set about bridging the gap in a systematic meaningful way.